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Review of: Thompson, J. Milburn, Introducing Catholic Social Thought

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Recommended Citation

Stiltner, B. "Book Review: J. Milburn Thompson, Introducing Catholic Social Thought." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 25.3 (2012): 393-96. Web.

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Review of: Thompson, J. Milburn, *Introducing Catholic Social Thought* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010). ix + 228 pp. £14.99 (pb), ISBN 978-1-57075-862-1.

Appeared in: *Studies in Christian Ethics* 25 (August 2012): 393-396.

DOI: 10.1177/0953946812444672j.

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This book enters a crowded field. There are many books on Catholic social thought (CST), as suggested by this book's select bibliography of over 200 items. Most religious studies publishers—especially those of a Catholic orientation—have one or more books on the topic. There are roughly thirty to forty texts in print that a college professor would consider when teaching a course or a module on Catholic social thought. Nonetheless, J. Milburn Thompson's *Introducing Catholic Social Thought* is a welcome addition to the field. Thompson has written a clear, informative, and fairly engaging book for college students and others wanting to know what CST is and why it matters.

Books on CST usually try to cover several angles from among the following: (1) explicating the list of CST principles, such as human dignity, common good, etc.; (2) recounting the century-plus history of modern CST; (3) elucidating and perhaps critically examining the content of classic Catholic Church documents on CST; (4) interpreting the theological and/or philosophical foundations of CST; (5) developing CST's ethical framework in dialogue with economics, political science, and/or other social sciences; (6) applying CST to contemporary economic issues; (7) applying CST to other social-ethical issues; (8) presenting examples and case-studies of CST-inspired action for justice; (9) subjecting mainstream CST to criticism, such as from economic conservatives; (10) developing practical tools for CST-guided social or

pastoral analysis; and (11) trying to create a distinctive interpretation of CST or add to the conceptual development of the tradition.

No book can successfully address all eleven of these angles; the resulting volume would be unwieldy or superficial. Many books touch on most of these items, but every author needs to limit the task and to address a reasonable number of issues, examples, and interlocutors.

Thompson's earlier book, *Justice and Peace: A Primer for Christians* (Orbis Books, rev. ed., 2003) offers some information on items 1 and 10, but a great deal of analysis in areas 5, 6, and 7 through data-rich chapters examining domestic and global economics and international security issue. His new book addresses angles 1, 2 and 3 over the first two chapters, then angles 6, 7 and 8 in three thematic chapters. Thompson places his book in among the field in a similar fashion, highlighting what he seems as his contributions: drawing upon the teaching of Benedict XVI, incorporating stories of justice-seekers and peacemakers, and taking a sympathetic yet critical perspective to the topic. CST, he writes, 'is precious, [yet] it is also imperfect. It has developed and changed. Only a critical conversation about its method and content, mistakes and strengths, lacunae, and future challenges can facilitate that development' (p. 2). The first chapter summarizes the history of CST from its biblical roots to the twentieth century, highlighting important heroes for justice in Christian history as well as major developments in theology and in models for the church's relationship to the world.

The second chapter includes two of the most common feature of books of this sort: a briefly explicated list of several CST principles (human dignity, option for the poor, social sin, etc.) and a short survey of the documents of Catholic social teaching, beginning, in this case, with the writings of Pope John XXIII. This chapter, titled 'Faithful Citizenship: The Church and Politics', conveys a central conceptual foundation for the book, namely, that Christian faith must

necessarily engage secular life, so the church must engage public life and politics. The church, says Thompson, has always had to resist the opposed temptations of privatization and politicization. He deals with the former by criticizing the low-points of Christian history when the church or Christian politicians wielded coercive power unjustly. He responds to the error of privatization by relying on the thought and example of John Courtney Murray. Murray helped establish the natural-law and humanistic basis for Catholicism's constructive engagement with pluralistic societies, in the confidence that the Catholic Church can contribute to common values as well as speak prophetically for the marginalized.

Silenced by the Vatican for a while, Murray's account of religious liberty was vindicated at the Second Vatican Council, which inaugurated a dramatic transformation in Catholicism: 'In less than a decade the Catholic Church underwent a metamorphosis from a reactionary, insular, conservative institution to a progressive pilgrim people of God in constructive dialogue with all aspects of the modern world' (p. 46). In addition to this conceptual framework and the other features mentioned above, the second chapter shows how political advocacy plays out in contemporary American Catholicism, through the offices of the Catholic bishops and through several lay-led advocacy organizations. The brief but effective overviews of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services, Center for Concern, NETWORK, Bread for the World, Pax Christi USA, and other groups is a nice feature of this book not found in many other texts.

The next two chapters address the issues of 'Economic Justice' and 'War and Peace'. These are fine, standard treatments, akin to what is found in many other textbooks on Christian social ethics. Each chapter provides historical survey, development of the relevant CST principles, and application to contemporary social problems. Reflecting his effort to be up-to-

date, Thompson surveys Pope Benedict's 2009 encyclical *Charity in Truth* (unfortunately it is 'a tough read', he says) for its moral vision of economic rights in the era of globalization, and recounts recent developments in the ethics of war and peace, such as 'justice after war' criteria and just peacemaking theory.

The fifth chapter raises two more themes in CST: 'A Consistent Ethic of Life and Care for the Earth'. The environmental ethic is dramatized by the story of Sister Dorothy Stang, who was murdered in 1988 at the age of 73 because Brazilian ranchers were so disturbed by her advocacy on behalf of the poor and on behalf of the rainforest. The story of this 'Martyr of the Amazon' points to interconnection of economic justice and protection of the environmental—a key theme in CST. The style of connectedness is likewise reflected in the consistent ethic of life, which is a principle of consistency and integration among all the moral concerns of CST. The consistent ethic was most famously advocated by Cardinal Joseph Bernadin, who sought to provide a comprehensive framework for Catholic moral advocacy and to encourage Catholics to for overcoming partisan division among themselves. Bernadin proposed that all life issues—from abortion to poverty to war to the death penalty—are important to the Church and that Catholics who care deeply care about one of these issues should expand their horizon to include others. Measured against the consistent ethic, said Bernadin and others, the platforms of both major political parties in the U.S. leave something to be desired.

Many books on CST skirt the topic of abortion, the assumption being that it is not an issue of social ethics. But that view cannot be seriously sustained, even outside the context of CST. Thompson writes temperately about a topic that is fraught within church and society. He affirms the consistent ethic, praising Bernadin's expansive, compassionate vision. He says, 'even if there might be some morally justified exceptions to the prohibition against abortion, the norm

prohibiting abortion seems reasonable, and the annual average of 1.5 million abortions in the United States is thus a moral outrage' (p. 150). Following the framework for political engagement laid down by Murray, Thompson acknowledges that there are no straight lines from Catholic moral principles to public policy. Catholics across the political spectrum should take an honest look at their own possible inconsistencies and recommit to the common good. If Christians genuinely integrate their commitment to the sanctity of human life with their commitment to social justice, 'Christianity will become significantly countercultural. In a violent world, Christians will choose life by proclaiming that abortion is not a life-giving response to a problem pregnancy, that execution will not combat crime...' (p. 152). However, readers should be aware that Thompson does not address the issues of abortion and capital punishment as social problems in the same fashion as he does the economic recession, war, and climate change; that is, he doesn't actually analyse the issues with factual information and apply CST principles to them. Rather, his focus is on how Christians and the Catholic Church act in the public arena in a pluralist democracy.

The strengths of this book are that it is based on sound research and gives an updated account of CST. It is accessible to its audience in style, content, and features. There are discussion questions at the end of each chapter and many sidebars with short selections from CST texts. Thompson makes the admittedly dry style of Church documents come alive through stories of activists. He has a definite point of view within CST—much more progressive than conservative—but he admirably addresses pro-life issues, often ignored in books on CST. Another example of his balance is when he contrasts the issue of torture as 'a clear violation of human rights' with the more complex issue of immigration, an issue on which he acknowledges a wider range of reasonable policy responses (pp. 65-70).

While not reaching for any new frontiers in CST, Thompson honestly addresses the strengths and the weaknesses of CST. Of course, the book has its own limitations and weaknesses. One limitation would be its U.S.-centred focus. While there is nothing wrong with addressing a specific audience, Thompson notes in the acknowledgments that he wrote some of the book during a three-month sabbatical in Cambridge, England, based at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology. The British and European context of his reflection and study do not show up in the text. A weakness of the book is the paucity of attention to globalization, which is obviously a major framework for any current assessment of global poverty and financial stability. Even though Benedict's encyclical applied official Catholic teaching to the challenges of globalization, Thompson only mentions the term in his few paragraphs devoted to the encyclical. A second weakness is that Thompson hardly acknowledges diversity among interpreters of the economic implications of CST. He leaps over Pope John Paul II's encyclical *The Hundredth Year*, the document that raises central issue of how CST assesses the free market and entrepreneurship. He leaves most of the well-known economic conservative interpreters of CST out of his bibliography. But none of these limitations and weaknesses override the strong qualities of the book, which should earn its own place on select bibliographies of Catholic social thought.